DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 081 RC 015 571

AUTHOR Goldenberg, Claude N.
TITLE Low-Income Hispanic Parents' Contributions to the Reading Achievement of Their First-Grade Children.
PUB DATE Oct 84
NOTE 53p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Evaluation Network/Evaluation Research Society (San Francisco, CA, October 10-13, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Expectation; Family Characteristics; Grade 1; *Hispanic Americans; Lower Class Parents; Lower Class Students; Mexican Americans; Parent Aspiration; *Parent Influence; *Parent Participation; *Parent Student Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Primary Education; *Reading Achievement; Reading Failure; *Reading Improvement

ABSTRACT

Case studies were used to explore parents' role in first-grade reading success of nine at-risk, low-income, Hispanic students in a small, predominantly Hispanic school district in Southern California. Refuting the theory that low achievement results from differences between home and school norms and values, the study found that all 15 parents valued educational achievement, were very interested in their children's progress, believed that achievement came through individual effort and persistence, were willing to help their children at home, responded to teacher suggestions of ways to help, and attended parent-teacher conferences. The study concluded that the key to effective parent involvement in reading success was steady, consistent help with reading curriculum at home. Family socioeconomic status, demographic characteristics, parental reading habits, and parents' attitudes toward children's academic achievement bore no relationship to reading success. Participant and non-participant observations, bilingual interviews with parents, teachers, and students, teacher rating scales, and decoding and word-recognition tests were used to explain children's varying first-grade reading achievement outcomes. Suggestions for parent involvement included teaching directly, reading to the child, reading games, and help in developing oral language abilities. Tables provide data on family characteristics and expectations and a form for teacher rating of attention and effort. (LFL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Rec'd 1-6-86

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED264081

Low-income Hispanic Parents' Contributions to the Reading Achievement of Their First-grade Children

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Claude N. Goldenberg
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Claude N. Goldenberg

Lennox School District
Lennox, California

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

RC015571

Running head: Hispanic Parents and Children's Reading Achievement

The author wishes to express his appreciation to Professors Ronald Gallimore and Deborah Stipek for their invaluable assistance. Deepest thanks to the children, parents, teachers, and administrators in the district where this study was conducted. Without their help and cooperation this research would not have been possible.

Low-income Hispanic Parents' Contributions

to the Reading Achievement of Their First-grade Children

Abstract

This paper investigates the role low-status Hispanic parents played in their children's acquisition of literacy skills. The parents of nine Hispanic first-graders, all of whom were at risk for reading failure, were interviewed in their homes three times during their children's first-grade year. Children's achievement was measured using criterion-referenced reading tests. Parents who made the greatest contribution to their children's reading achievement were those who directly helped their children learn the first-grade reading curriculum. There was no link between a child's achievement and home socio-economic status or general home process dimensions. All parents were capable of helping their children learn the first-grade reading curruculum; moreover, all parents said they would be willing to play a more active role in their children's acquisition of literacy skills. The significance of these findings for the education of minority children is discussed.

Low-income Hispanic Parents' Contributions to the Reading Achievement of Their First-grade Children

By any indicator, academic underachievement among large segments of the U.S. Hispanic population is profound, persistent, and, seemingly, entrenched. Hispanic students score lower than do their white, middle-class counterparts on tests of academic achievement. They are more likely to fail one or more grades in school, be placed in special education, and drop out altogether. Attitudes toward school are more negative, with Hispanic students reporting a higher degree of alienation and disenchantment with school and school personnel (Astin, 1982; Hinckley et al., 1979; Lambert, 1981; Olivas, 1981; Steinberg et al., 1984). The research reported here suggests that Hispanic parents' involvement in their children's education may be helpful in ameliorating the chronic and endemic school failure among large segments of the U.S. Hispanic population.

Background

Previous research has attempted to explain minority children's underachievement by invoking one of two culturally-based hypotheses. One is the "cultural deprivation" hypothesis, which states that minority children come to school socially and cognitively ill-equipped to meet the demands of the school. They begin school at a disadvantage and fall progressively further behind their higher status classmates. This hypothesis, largely discredited by research of the past 15 years (Gumperz, 1981), has been replaced in the last ten years or so by the "cultural discontinuity or incompatibility" hypothesis. This more recent view assumes that minority children are not deprived nor do they suffer from cognitive or social deficits. Rather, their

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

skills, strengths, and values are seen to be either irrelevant or maladaptive in the school, an institution founded upon principles of mainstream Anglo-American culture. (See Carter & Segura, 1979; Gumperz, 1981; Ogbu, 1978). However these two hypothesized explanations may differ, both are predicated on at least one common assumption--that fundamental differences between the culture of the home and that of the school are at the heart of minority children's school failure.

Gumperz's (1981) work with black children on communicative inferences in the classroom is a good example of a recent strand of research within the cultural discontinuity framework. Gumperz and his colleagues, building upon earlier work by Phillips (1972) and others regarding school and home "participant structures," are seeking

> to identify developmental and social differences in conversational strategies [and] to show how these differences affect teachers' judgments and the child's classroom experience and motivation (p. 20).

The work of Gumperz and others focuses on the details of face-to-face interactions: verbal and nonverbal communication and the sense individuals make of it. At the other end of the sociological spectrum, researchers have attempted to explain achievement disparities between minority and Anglo children by considering differences in the larger economic and social opportunity structures existing in American society. Carter and Segura (1979) and Ogbu (1978), for example, argue that students' and parents' awareness of limited occupational and economic opportunities undermines their motivation to succeed in school. According to this argument, disadvantaged ethnic and socio-economic groups, such as blacks,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Hispanics, and native Americans, have high failure rates in school because they have no good objective reason for trying to succeed. Ogbu and others hypothesize that however much minority group members may mouth the standard pieties about the importance of education in getting ahead, minority individuals in reality know that educational attainment cannot play the same instrumental role for them as it does for the dominant ethnic and socio-economic class. As a result, their motivation level is low, and so is their school achievement: "The perception of schooling as it relates to limited future opportunities," Ogbu writes, "may be largely unconscious for many caste minority group members, but it is an important factor in their relative lack of serious attitudes and efforts in school (p. 41; emphasis added).

Despite the vastly different analytic foci, the work represented by Gumperz and Ogbu have this in common: They explain minority children's generally low achievement levels as resulting from differences between the norms and values of children's homes and those of the school. These differences, or discontinuities, adversely affect minority children's and their families' motivation to succeed in school, and it is these incompatibilities that underlie the disproportionate incidence of school failure among minority children.

But what has largely been ignored in the voluminous literature dealing with underachievement and minority populations is the possible existence of considerable commonalities, or continuities, between the children's homes and the school. The values and motivations minority children bring with them from home may not clash at every point with those required (or at least, desirable) for adequate school achievement. Commonalities almost certainly exist, and building upon them may help address the problem of poor achievement among minority

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

children. In other words, whatever discrepancies may in fact exist between dimensions of minority children's home and school experiences, important areas of compatibility may also exist, which, if explored and exploited, could lead to substantial improvement in minority children's school achievement. This is the central theme of this paper.

Methods

This report is part of a larger, ethnographic study of home and school influences on the Spanish reading achievement of at-risk, low-income, Hispanic first-graders in a small, predominantly Hispanic school district in Southern California (Note 1). Nine year-long case studies, begun when the children were in kindergarten and continuing throughout first grade, were conducted. The children selected had no known handicaps, were Spanish-dominant, were at risk for first-grade reading failure, based on a reading-readiness indicator, the Kindergarten Student Rating Scale (SRS; Feshbach et al., 1974).

The early phases of this research began in December, 1982, when the children were still in kindergarten, and the study's last datum was gathered in the last month of first grade, June, 1984. Using participant and non-participant observation, interviews with parents and teachers, teacher rating scales and a small amount of testing and conversing with the children, I collected the material necessary to try and explain the children's varying first-grade reading achievement outcomes.

In general, the methodology I employed throughout this portion of the study can best be described as "direct observation." Robert Coles (1977), borrowing from Anna Freud, provides the best definition I know:

> [D]irect observation [is] a sustained involvement with

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> a person or a family, maintained long enough so that the observer has some basis in experience, in words heard and actions observed, for coming to whatever more general conclusions seem warranted (p. 559).

Data-gathering during first grade had four components: classroom observations of children, data gathered from teachers, parent interviews, and testing of children.

1. Classroom observations. During observations I generally sat from five to 15 feet from the target child and recorded all behaviors related to the child's classroom functioning mentioned above. Occasionally, and not in any systematic fashion, I took one of the teacher's reading groups and taught or reviewed some material the teacher wanted the group to cover. However, I generally did not interact with the children in the study, unless they approached me, which occasionally happened. Observation periods lasted from under 10 minutes to almost an hour, the average being approximately 30-35 minutes. Following each observation, I immediately reviewed my notes and wrote out more fully incidents I had not had time to transcribe in their entirety. No mechanical devices were used during the study.

The nine children were observed in first grade, from July until March, approximately every two or three weeks. (They were also observed once, briefly, in kindergarten.) Total first-grade observation time per child was approximately six hours. (This figure actually underestimates total observation time, since I often recorded a child's behavior when I was in the classroom waiting to speak with the teacher, observing another child, or for some other matter. These "spot" or "unscheduled" observations do not enter into the observation times noted above.)

Approximately 80% of the observations occurred during the reading hour, which was either the first hour of the day (8:15 to 9:15) or the last hour (1:35 to 2:35). I also observed during library times, story times, language arts times, and miscellaneous times such as morning activities--roll call, calendar, announcements, etc. I watched children as they did individual seatwork, had small-group lessons, were with the entire class, and when they had bits of free time.

2. Data from the first-grade teachers.

a) Ratings of children's attention and effort. In the third week of school, the first-grade teachers were asked to rate all children in their classrooms on four items taken from the first-grade Student Rating Scale (Adelman & Feshbach, 1971). See Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

The items asked the extent to which children attended to instruction, followed simple directions, worked without supervision, and put forth reasonable effort during instruction.

The reliability (internal consistency) of the four items was high, alpha=.92 (n=129). The reliability of the four-item scale

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ranged from .85 to .96 among the five teachers.

b) Predicted first-grade reading achievement. In the second month of classes, teachers were asked to predict each of the 129 students' reading achievement at the end of the year, using a scale from 1 (low) to 9.

c) Teacher interviews and informal conversations. Formal interviews with the teachers were held around the eighth week of classes and again in the sixth month of school. At these interviews, teachers were asked to predict the children's reading achievement that year (see above); they were also asked to explain their predictions. With the exception of the prediction question, all questions were open-ended. Teachers were asked about various other children, as well as the nine study subjects, to avoid drawing attention exclusively to target children. Interviews lasted from one to two hours.

In addition, throughout the year I frequently conversed informally with the teachers about the children I was studying. Most of the information I gathered about teachers' views of the children's achievement, and the children's school functioning in general (performance, motivation, attention, effort, etc.), came from these intermittent, often brief and casual, exchanges.

3. Parent interviews. Parents were contacted by telephone to arrange meeting times. No parent who agreed when first contacted by phone to participate in the study refused to arrange subsequent interviews. Interviews were conducted in the children's homes in the first, fourth or fifth, and eighth month of classes. Where both parents lived with the child, the mother and the father were present. Most interviews were conducted in the late afternoon or early evening, on weekdays, and when the child was at home. All were conducted in

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Spanish, though two fathers (those with the highest educational levels) spoke English, and they often answered my questions in English. Neither of their wives spoke English, however, so these interviews generally were carried out both in Spanish and English.

Interviews were semi-structured. I had a series of mostly open-ended questions to ask and a set of topics to cover, but they were not necessarily covered in the order they appeared on the interview protocol. In general, the interview questions asked about dimensions of home life previous research had indicated may play a role in children's academic achievement:

a. amount of reading in the home and the availability of reading material;

b. parents' attitude toward and valuation of their child's school achievement and future educational attainment;

c. parents' involvement with their child's school learning, especially whether they (or someone in the household) helped the child learn to read;

d. general cognitive environment, as determined by amount of conversing with the child, frequency and nature of outings with the child, television viewing by family members, and emphasis on homework and school lessons;

e. parents' views of the child's interest in reading and their assessment of the child's current level of school performance;

f. extent and nature of parents' contact with the teacher and the school, and parents' willingness to become more involved in their child's school learning.

In addition to the open-ended questions dealing with these dimensions of the home environment, there were four structured

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

questions: two asked parents to predict (or, in the third interview, assess) their children's school and reading performance; two asked parents their educational aspirations and expectations for their child. For these items, parents selected their answers from a given range of responses. Parents were also asked for demographic and socio-economic information--their place of birth, years in the United States, occupation, education, and number of persons in the household. There were no questions dealing with income or immigration status.

Finally, a one-page observation form was filled out immediately after the interview, where the following were recorded: whether television was on or off, reading materials in sight, who was present, what the subject child was doing, any parent-child interactions, child verbalizations, and general noise level.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2-1/2 hours, with an average of approximately 90 minutes each.

4. Testing. I administered decoding and word-recognition tests to all study children twice during the year--once in the third month of school and once in the eighth month. Both tests were based on the end-of-book reading tests the children take to determine whether they are ready to progress to the next book. (I also tested some of the children at different times during the year, in order to attempt specific determinations about their emerging decoding skills.)

Success in first-grade reading was determined by children's performance on the second test mentioned above. This was a three-part decoding and word-recognition test, administered individually to the study children in the next-to-last (i.e., eighth) month of first grade. The test consisted of words and phonic elements drawn from the first-grade reading curriculum, through the fourth book in the reading

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

series. According to the school's bilingual reading coordinator, completing and mastering the material in the fourth book constituted being on grade level at the end of first grade, with respect to school norms. An item was judged correct if the child read (or sounded out) the word accurately, regardless of intonation or spacing between syllables or even letters. This was not a comprehension test; rather, in keeping with the reading program's overriding emphasis in first grade, its purpose was to gauge decoding and word-recognition skills.

Performance on part 3 of the test, which was based on words from the fourth book, constitutes the primary criterion for judging whether a child was on grade level according to local norms.

Prior to testing the children, no criterion had been set to determine first-grade reading success. However, a clear and unmistakable division in the children's performance on the test emerged: four scored 70% or higher on part 3, whereas five scored 40% or lower. Moreover, there were corresponding and consistent differences between the two groups' performances on parts 1 and 2. The nine case study subjects could, therefore, be divided into two groups--four who seemed to be on grade level in their reading achievement (the "successful" ones) and five who were substantially below grade level (the "unsuccessful" ones). The remainder of this paper will deal with the role parents played in their children's first-grade reading success.

Results

Socio-economic and demographic data for the successful and unsuccessful children are presented in Table 2 (Note 3).

Insert table 2 here

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Ten of the 15 parents were from Mexico, four were from Central America, and one was Puerto Rican. Most (10) had been in the United States 10 years or less, though as a group, the parents of the unsuccessful children had been in the United States longer than those of the successful children (10.1 vs. 6.6 years, respectively). Households were small to moderate in size, ranging from four to eight persons. Three households were headed by women, Marta's, Elena's, and Mario's.

The families were uniformly low in socio-economic status. With two exceptions, no parent had progressed beyond the 6th grade (range: grades 2 to 6). The two exceptions were Fernando's father, who finished high school (in Puerto Rico) and had taken some community college courses here, and Freddy's father, who had a bachelor's from the Italian University in Guatemala. He had also taken a variety of community college courses here, as well as typing and sign language. Both their wives, however, had ended their schooling after the 6th grade. The occupational range was correspondingly narrow and low. The occupations of working household heads included assembly line work, cleaning airplanes, painting and building furniture, hotel housekeeping, and ironing clothes in a cleaners. Two of the women who were household heads (of three total) were not employed outside the home. There were no apparent differences between the groups in family size and make-up or in socio-economic characteristics.

In Table 3 we see parents' expectations for their children's first-grade performance, overall and with respect to reading; parents' educational aspirations and expectations for the child; and parents' own reading habits.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Insert Table 3 here

These data are from the second interview, conducted in November or December, mid-way through the first grade.

There were no apparent differences between the two groups of parents in their responses to these items. In general, parents expected average to good school performance. They wanted their children to go "as far as possible" in their education, though some would not venture a specific educational level they wanted their child to attain, nor make a prediction as to how far the child would progress in school. There was some variability in parents' reading habits, though for the most part, reading did not play an important role in their lives. A notable exception was Karen's father, a very religious man with wide ranging interests in religion, history, and philosophy, who read avidly in these areas. He also taught religion and Bible classes at his church. Other parents, if they read at all, generally read periodicals.

It is evident from the above data that family socio-economic status, demographic characteristics, parental reading habits, and parents' attitudes toward their children's academic achievement bore no relationship to the children's first-grade reading success. Yet some parents had a pronounced effect on their children's reading achievement. In two cases, children's better-than-expected reading success can be traced directly to parental help. To these cases we now turn.

Freddy

Until the first week of March--fully two-thirds of the way through the year--it appeared certain that Freddy would be one of the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

unsuccessful children in the study. This was true even though Freddy had been one of two study children furthest along (with respect to progress in the school's reading program) at the beginning of first grade. He began the year in a middle reading group, having gone half-way through the second book before finishing kindergarten. Furthermore, he was one of three study children to answer all four reading items correctly when I administered the end-of-book test in the third month of school. But almost immediately upon entering first grade, Freddy's academic fortunes began to decline. They fell steadily throughout the year and reached their lowest point in February, when he was in the very lowest of the six reading groups in the class. His teacher, somewhat exasperated, said it was too bad he had not been kept in kindergarten for another year.

In the third week of classes, Freddy's teacher said he was not doing very well. She said she had to work with him individually, and that even then he often did not "get it too quickly." His major problem, the teacher thought, was his lack of attention. She said his "work habits" were poor, and he needed to play around less and do his work more. In her ratings of the children's attention and effort during lessons, the teacher gave Freddy a score that placed him among the lowest 10 to 15% in the class.

The teacher's prediction for Freddy's reading success that year was, not surprisingly, extremely low. She rated him a 2 (on the 1-9 scale). Again, he was the second lowest among the nine children in the study. In the interview, the teacher repeated that Freddy's major problem was his attention. "He needs extra help," she said, in part because his attending habits were so poor. He misses important information or instruction, she continued, and he falls farther and farther behind. In addition, she said, the "work is hard for him."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Though she thought he was of "normal intelligence," she saw him as a child who learns slowly and for whom learning is rather difficult. She also mentioned his occasional tendency to write backwards as some cause for concern. But the main factor impeding his progress, she said, and the reason for her very low expectations for his reading success, was his failure to attend adequately in class. In his October report card she wrote, "He does not understand many concepts because he is very inattentive ["distraido"--literally, "distracted"] in class." While he was always obedient, and would always pay attention--at least initially--when specifically directed, I too had noticed that in the absence of explicit and consistent directives his mind (certainly his eyes) appeared to wander in and out from the task or lesson at hand. What effect this had on his learning is, of course, difficult to know; but it was very easy to see its effects on the teacher's judgments.

Freddy's academic fortunes deteriorated steadily. In October, the teacher felt he did not know the material sufficiently well to advance to the next book, and she placed him in a lower group with another teacher. There, he also did poorly. He was one of the two lowest children in the group, and the teacher was concerned about his progress. In January, she told me he was "really struggling," still confusing the four basic consonants, m, p, t, and l. Around this time, the aide in Freddy's homeroom teacher's class mentioned he was "spacy," and he seemed always to be "on the moon." She said he was sure to end up in a special education class. The teacher commented to the aide and me after school one day that he had almost been retained the previous year in kindergarten. It was too bad he had not been, she said. "He would have been perfect for kindergarten this year," she said. "As it is, he's not getting any positive reinforcement."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

At the beginning of February, Freddy's reading teacher--feeling her suspicion had been confirmed (by, I regret to report, a test I had given) that Freddy and another child were far below the others in the group--sent these two boys back to Freddy's homeroom teacher to be placed in a lower group still. Freddy remained in this group, the lowest one in the track, for the next month, reviewing and practicing letters he had read correctly for me when I tested him in September. During this time he was extremely enthusiastic and active in the reading group lessons. He was clearly the most proficient "reader" among his group-mates, and he consistently won contests and races the teacher contrived for many of the lessons. I had never seen him so overtly engaged in the lessons and group activities. His performance and demeanor seemed to confirm the wisdom of putting him with the very lowest children, where he could be, as the teacher later said, "a superstar."

Freddy for once was doing extremely well in his reading group, and the teacher seemed to take every opportunity to reinforce his performance. During one lesson, where the children were awarded points as they quickly wrote dictation words the teacher called out, Freddy was clearly outperforming the others in his group. "You're really fast, Freddy," the teacher said, as she awarded him more points. Successive points on the chalkboard drew increasingly bigger smiles from Freddy. Throughout the lesson he laughed and chortled with delight, looking from side to side at each child's total, as he amassed points and the others fell further behind. When his brother came to pick him up after school, the teacher said to him, "Look how many points your brother has!" Freddy beamed.

Freddy, the teacher said, had "been doing better since moving to this group." While she did not elaborate at the moment, from her

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

perspective he no doubt seemed to be where it would do him the most good--he was working on his reading and writing skills, and he was getting a great deal of positive reinforcement, which the teacher had previously worried he was not getting. Furthermore, he was attentive and engaged during the reading lessons, and he was very obviously the most successful child in the group. His success, enthusiasm, and overt involvement in the lessons were all evident to me, and the teacher commented on it as well. What Freddy (and others in the group) needed, the teacher thought, was "constant review." So Freddy and his group reviewed letters, syllables, and some words that they had been unable to master, apparently, since the beginning of school, seven months before.

But the best thing to happen to Freddy that year was his teacher's reaction one morning in early March when, for the third consecutive day, Freddy failed to bring in his homework. Several days before, in an attempt to have the children bring their assignments to class regularly, the teacher had instituted a new policy: If a child brought in her homework, a star would be placed by her name on a large chart. But, no homework the first day, name goes on chalkboard; second day, a check by the name; third day, a second check beside the name and the child would be suspended from school until the parents came in for a conference. Freddy had been the first casualty.

The teacher called Freddy's mother that very day and told her what had happened. She said she would suspend Freddy unless the parents came to school immediately for a conference. The teacher said she could hear Freddy's father yelling in the background as his wife relayed to him what the teacher was saying. That afternoon, both parents went to see Freddy's teacher.

When they arrived, the teacher told me, Freddy's father at first

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

accused the teacher of being negligent, of not sending notes home and following up. The teacher said she had been sending notes home for months. She went to Freddy's cubby and took out two or three months' worth of homework papers and notes and showed these to Freddy's parents. She said that quieted the father somewhat. They "admitted they were lenient with Freddy," the teacher said, and that they did not enforce rules at home. Freddy's mother had previously said she had trouble getting him to do household chores, the teacher told me. (The parents had also mentioned to me, during one of the interviews, that Freddy did not always want to help with the jobs around the house.) During the conference the teacher also told the parents that Freddy was quite behind in his reading achievement and that he was very likely to be retained in first grade. Freddy's father was extremely angry, the teacher said, and he was pacing up and down the room. He said he would send his wife during the reading hour for the next two weeks to work with Freddy, to make sure he did his lessons, and to help him catch up.

"Obviously something worked," the teacher said, a little more than a week after the parent conference. She said "the mere fact his father was in here" had an effect; Freddy was "quaking in his boots." The day his parents were to come, after Freddy found out the teacher had called them and they were on their way, Freddy got 32 out of 32 dictation words correct. "And that was even before anything happened at home," she said, slightly amazed. Freddy's mother came in every day after that, during the reading hour, and within a week, he had finished the reading book he was in, passed the test, and moved to a higher group. "I don't want to say it [was] laziness," the teacher said, when I asked what she thought accounted for the change in Freddy's performance. "But I think it was." That was why he was not

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

progressing as he should have been, she said. But now, "everything I give him he produces perfectly well. It's a whole new Freddy," she said, quite pleased with the dramatic turnaround, even if somewhat surprised at its swiftness.

As to the role Freddy's mother had played in this change, the teacher thought she too had helped a great deal. "She's quite good," she said. "She's a smart lady. But she just didn't know [before this incident] what to do to help Freddy." Now, the teacher said, she "knows what Freddy needs to know, what he doesn't [know], and she works on these areas." The teacher was also very happy to have Freddy's mother in class because she helped with some of the very lowest children, whom the teacher felt needed constant help and support, but for whom she did not have the time during the reading hour. By year's end, Freddy was in the third reading group from the top (of six), and the teacher was very satisfied with his reading achievement. (She decided to retain him in first grade anyway, but not, she said because of low academic skills; it was due to his general maturity level.) He was one of the successful children in the study, with the second highest score on the word-recognition test I gave. His reading group placement was the highest of all the study children. None of these outcomes could possibly have been predicted three months before.

Freddy's parents' account of what had happened at the conference, and after it, was substantially the same as the teacher's. At the last interview, Freddy's father told me Freddy had improved "100%". "You'd be surprised how this guy advanced," the father said. Following the session with the teacher in March, Freddy's father had a "pep talk" with his son. He told me (in May) he asked the boy that evening, "Are you a mouse?" Freddy answered no, his father recounted.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Well you are acting like one," he told Freddy. "You are a lion, not a mouse," he said, and he wrote for Freddy on a piece of paper, "Freddy is a lion." Freddy's father showed the paper to Freddy and helped him sound out the words. "He liked that," the father said, smiling broadly, seemingly pleased at his son's willingness to rise to a challenge. "I think that's what provoked (sic) him," he said. (Freddy's father spoke mostly English with me, as did Fernando's father.) Freddy's father also told Freddy he wanted him to get to the top reading group, and if he made it, he would buy him something. "That woke him up," he said.

Freddy's father said the mother's help also played a role in Freddy's reading achievement. Her presence during the reading hour "kept him on his toes." Both parents agreed the extra practice and instruction Freddy's mother gave him was very important. She began working with Freddy three or four hours daily, including weekends. She not only reviewed what they were learning at school, but she also covered new material, further along in his reading book. As the teacher had previously told me, because Freddy's mother came into the class during the reading hour, she knew "what Freddy needs to know, what he doesn't [know], and she works on these areas." Freddy's mother said Freddy never resisted nor complained. In fact, she told me one day when I saw her after school that Freddy sometimes wanted to continue working in his workbook, even though his mother said they were through for the day.

Whether the parents' impact was largely motivational, a result of the extra instruction, or some combination of the two is, of course, debatable. More important is the fact that their intervention (prompted by the teacher's call) dramatically improved Freddy's first-grade reading achievement. He quickly mastered the letters,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

syllables, and words and, consequently, was able to advance through the reading curriculum. Evidently, Freddy's parents were willing and able to help their son progress through the reading curriculum. In fact, in the final interview they expressed some annoyance over the teacher's failure to have notified them earlier about Freddy's reading achievement lag. Ironically, the parents were called in over a relatively trivial matter, Freddy's failure to bring in his homework. But their response--and Freddy's eventual reading achievement in first grade--illustrate the substantial and direct influence parents can have on their children's academic growth.

Elena

The other child whose reading achievement was markedly affected by her mother's intervention was Elena. But in contrast to Freddy's parents, Elena's mother took the initiative to teach her daughter to read from the beginning of the year and with no prompting from the teacher. Elena's case is particularly interesting in light of the arguments by Ogbu (1978) and others that limited opportunities for minorities lead to a "relative lack of serious attitudes and efforts in school." Limited as these opportunities undoubtedly are, there was no evidence among the parents I spoke with that attitudes toward their children's school achievement were anything but serious. In fact, Elena's mother wanted to assure that her daughter learn to read in first grade, despite great uncertainty about her own and her children's future.

Elena's mother had all the standard reasons for wondering what the future held for her daughter. The family is squarely situated in one of the lowest socio-economic strata of American society: Elena's mother had not gone past the first few months of third grade in her

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

native Guatemala; her oldest sons, now in the United States, had only gone as far as junior high school; her daughter, who lives with Elena, her mother, and her kindergarten-age brother, had only gotten to the sixth grade and, when her father died, went to work as a seamstress. Elena's mother does not work.

But in addition, Elena's mother lives under the cloud of being in this country illegally. She told me this, indirectly, at our final interview when I asked her how far she thought Elena would get in school. As was her custom when I asked this question, she resisted answering, saying one could not really know what the future held in store. This was not an unusual response among the parents I interviewed. Though many expressed the hope that their children would study enough to enter some profession, many did not want to predict how far their children would get; others felt it would be impertinent, before God, to venture such a guess. Elena's mother said, a little wistfully, "I have always desired . . . that she excel, if she can. But you know, after one period of time there comes another. One never knows. . ." Then, after a brief pause, she looked at me and said, "'La migra' [the Immigration and Naturalization Service] grabs us and they throw us back to our country." She laughed, either out of nervousness or just at the arbitrariness of it all. "But we go out there anyway," she said, pointing with her chin toward the street where they walk and do their shopping. "At any moment they can get you. We'll see what God says. We'll see how long we can be in this country."

Yet despite the material and objective conditions of her life, and her statements expressing the belief that their fate was in the hands of God and the INS, Elena's mother's attitude toward her daughter's schooling, and the effort she was willing to expend on it, were indeed quite "serious." We may argue whether the specific

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

techniques she used were appropriate. Certainly home conditions were not ideal for optimal cognitive and academic growth--there was relatively little verbal communication and there was a complete absence of actual reading going on, aside from the mother's lessons. But the more important point is that despite the precariousness of their situation, Elena's mother, as we will see, did not lack the interest to help her daughter do well in school. It was unquestioned in her mind that she should do all she could to assure Elena's success in school. And Elena, as did all the children, reflected her parent's attitudes toward learning to read and, more generally, doing well in school.

In many ways, Elena's reading success was the least surprising and the most easily explained of all the children in the study. Simply put, Elena did relatively well in first-grade reading because her mother took it upon herself to make certain she learned how to read. From the start of first grade, Elena's mother taught her the sounds and the names of the letters. She even bought her plastic letters, which the mother happened to see ("by chance," she told me) when she was out shopping one day early in the school year. In fact, she bought two sets, one for Elena and one for her kindergarten-age brother, so they could both play and practice with them. "They started learning the letters," she told me, "and I showed them how to join [them] to form words." For the children it was like a game, the mother said.

She also taught Elena using more standard, direct means. She had her copy letters and words, read short sentences, and write words and phrases from dictation. And she of course made certain Elena completed any homework she brought from school. This was always the top priority. But her mother also gave her additional tasks. At the

second interview (in November), she said she gave Elena extra lessons almost daily, including weekends, though by the end of the year this seemed to have tapered off. At the third interview (in May), she told me she generally gave Elena some reading or writing exercises when she did not have homework from school. In addition, the mother said, sometimes she got angry at the children for fighting or becoming too loud, and she would make them turn off the television and do some lessons she would concoct, usually copying letters or numbers.

During the month-long vacations, Elena's mother regularly had her review letter sounds, combinations, and words. Even during the last break of the year (in April), when Elena went to Girl Scouts every weekday from 8:00 to 3:30, her mother still had her practice her letters for about an hour each day. Elena always did her homework or her mother's "assignments" without any hesitation, the mother told me--except occasionally when a friend came by and wanted her to play. But her mother insisted she do her work first, and Elena always did, with no resistance.

Motivation was not at all a problem. Elena's mother told me at the beginning of the year that she thought Elena would do well in reading "because she likes it . . . she likes to sit there and write letters in the [work]books." Several months later, the mother again told me Elena was "very enthusiastic about learning." In this regard, Elena was very similar to the other children in the study, all of whose parents reported their children's positive attitudes toward reading and writing. At the third interview, Elena, as was usually the case when I went to the home, was at the kitchen table, in front of a pile of papers, tablets, crayons, and pencils. Children came in and out of the house--sometimes all would congregate around the kitchen table; sometimes they would go to a back bedroom. Since this

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

was my final visit, I had brought Elena a coloring book with pictures of animals and with their names written beside them. During the interview, as Elena's mother and I talked, Elena took up the book and, with three or four children grouped around her (including her brother), started sounding out the animal names. (Even though they were in English, she decoded the words--successfully, from what I could hear--according to the letter sounds as she knew them.) The other children looked on, quite engrossed, as Elena read the names and showed the pictures around, much as teachers do when they they read stories to their classes. Elena's mother looked over at them and said, nodding in their direction, "That's what they do . . . that's how they'll stay for a while." She shrugged and added with amusement, "[Who] knows what they're saying." Apparently, the heavy doses of home teaching had not dampened Elena's interest in learning to read. Elena herself told me at school that she liked reading and writing. She told me in January she liked doing her lessons better than going outside.

In spite of the remarkable emphasis on reading instruction at home, Elena's mother did not read on her own at all. The family had no books (except for a Bible), magazines, nor newspapers ("I never buy newspapers," the mother said). They occasionally got flyers or advertisements in the mail or on the doorstep--and Elena would look through these, the mother said--but there was virtually no printed reading matter in the home. Elena's mother said they used to have children's books, but the children fought over them and pulled them apart so she stopped buying them. Once, with a parent education class she was taking at the school, she had gone to the public library and checked out children's books and accompanying narrative records. She said the children looked through these on their own; she, however, did

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

not read to them. At the May interview, she said she had not gone to get any more books in quite some time. How long since she had checked some out? I asked. Somewhat vaguely, she answered, "It's been a while."

Despite the mother's very low level of education, and the complete absence of reading on her own, she was absolutely committed to having Elena become literate as quickly and as thoroughly as possible. And, as I will discuss below, she made a significant contribution to Elena's first-grade reading achievement. She adopted an active posture in this regard, refusing to leave her daughter's acquisition of reading skills to chance or solely to the school. She was, furthermore, not hesitant to ask one of the children's teachers whenever a question came up. She told me at the first interview, for example, that she had gone the week before to speak with Elena's teacher because something was unclear in the homework she had assigned. The mother also attended all parent conferences called by the teachers, and she was deeply interested (as were all the parents) in whatever the teachers had to say about the children's academic performance.

Why did Elena's mother play such an active role in teaching her daughter to read? The question can be answered in two ways. The most immediate motivation came from Elena's having started school very late. Elena had arrived from Guatemala in March, 1983, and she did not begin school until she came to this country. When she began first grade she was more than 7-1/2 years old (the average first-grader at the school was just over six at the beginning of the year). Elena's mother thought it very important that she have her daughter make up for lost time. During our last interview, she explained to me why she took it upon herself to teach Elena to read:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> To see if she could move ahead [with her reading]. She is older [and] it's necessary that she become more intelligent. She has already lost one year. She's eight, and she will soon be nine.

And, the mother added with some satisfaction, "Now she can read . . . just about anything you put in front of her. By and large, I taught her all the letters."

Second, and undergirding the first, more immediate impetus, was a profound commitment to and a high value placed upon educational achievement. In this regard, Elena's mother was no different from any of the other parents with whom I spoke. They all revealed great interest in their children doing well in school. Though they expressed varying degrees of optimism in predicting their children's educational futures--and some, including Elena's mother were even unwilling to hazard a prediction--it seemed to be an article of faith among them that their children should try to do well in school and get as far as they could. Whether there was any value in pursuing one's studies as far as possible was not even an issue in the parents' minds. When I asked why they wanted their children to go as far as they could in their education, many parents responded as if the answer were obvious: "Whoever does not have a profession or a career is nothing in this life," one mother said. When you look for a job, a father told me, "the first thing they ask you" is how far you got in school. "I'd like him to be something in this life," another mother said, looking up at the ceiling:

> If he could be a teacher or a doctor. I don't want him to remain here like me, without having studied or anything. I'd like him to be an educated person [a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

person who has studied].

Another father told me that if his daughter went to college "it would be such a pleasure for me." "People who are superior excel in this country," he said, and he hoped his children would take advantage of the opportunities.

Elena's mother was no different. The value of an education for getting ahead in life was beyond question. It was prominent in her beliefs, and she was eager that Elena share this value. When I asked, for example, what kinds of things she and Elena talked about, she thought for a moment, and said, "I tell her I want her to work, to study. . . This is what we talk about," she said simply. At the second interview, she told me Elena had asked how one becomes a teacher: "I told her by studying. You have to study quite a bit in order to get anything." It was this belief, together with the fact that Elena's mother wanted Elena to make up for lost time, that provided the motivation for her teaching Elena to read at home.

An important question here is, What role did the school play in Elena's acquisition of reading skills? In saying that Elena's mother was primarily responsible for her daughter's relatively good reading performance I do not mean to suggest that her teachers made no contribution. Certainly she learned letters and words, and she gained practice in reading them during her reading hour (Note 4). But it does seem clear that Elena would not have gotten as far as she did in first-grade reading had it not been for her mother's efforts. We can examine this assertion in two ways: first, by asking whether Elena's mother taught her letter sounds she had not learned in school; second, by considering what might have happened if Elena's mother had not taken it upon herself to teach her daughter to read. In neither case

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

is the evidence conclusive; it is especially problematic with regard to the second, admittedly speculative, question. Nonetheless, answering these questions will provide greater insight into Elena's case and the role her mother played in her better-than-expected reading achievement.

Did Elena's mother teach her letters the teachers did not? It seems she did. Toward the end of January, I gave a group of children a short individual reading and decoding test. I also interviewed the teachers to see how far their respective groups had gone. Elena's group, in addition to various sight words, had been taught the first six consonants in the school's reading continuum: m, p, t, l, s, and n. Elena was able to decode syllables with those consonants, as well as those with f, v, r, and c, which her group would not be taught until much later in the year. I asked Elena where she had learned these letters, and she answered that her mother had taught her (Note 5).

Elena's performance was by no means spectacular (she read a total of 27 words correctly, out of a possible 47), though it was the second best of the six children in her group (of seven) that I tested. More important than her absolute (or even relative) performance is the quite direct evidence of her mother's contribution to her decoding skills. When I tested Elena in May, she again could read letters her group had not been taught, such as z, ll, and g. She again answered, "My mother teaches me," when I asked where she had learned those letter sounds (Note 6).

What might have happened if Elena's mother had not taken it upon herself to teach Elena to read? Problematic and speculative as it is, this question is perhaps the more significant one. It is here that we see most clearly one very critical link between a child's experience

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

at home and her achievement at school. The most obvious effect that the mother's teaching had was to teach Elena letters the teachers had not yet taught. The mother's primary impact, however, lay in helping Elena keep up with what she was being taught at school. The mother reinforced what the reading teachers were teaching, and in so doing, probably helped prevent Elena's falling behind her group-mates.

It is important in this regard to see precisely what it was the mother had Elena doing. At the second interview, as I was trying to form a clearer picture of what she taught Elena and how she went about it, the mother told me she taught her words, phrases, letters, the alphabet, and letter combinations such as "te," "ma," and "pa." She specifically mentioned these syllables, which constitute part of the main fare of the reading instruction, especially in the first half of the year. "The same [things] she brings from school," the mother added. The steady practice at home undoubtedly increased the likelihood of Elena's consistently recalling the letter sounds, as the research on direct instruction, time on task, and over-learning suggests (Carnine & Silbert, 1979). Elena's reading and dictation performance was almost certainly aided by the extra practice and instruction she received at home. Teachers, aware that extra practice at home would help children remember their letters and syllables, often sent flashcards or mimeographed sheets home for this purpose. Elena's reading teacher usually did this several times per week. Elena's mother of course made sure Elena complied with the assignment, but, as we have seen, she did not stop there. Nor did she wait for flashcards to be sent home in order to have Elena learn and practice syllables and words. While all the parents I spoke with complied when they received notes from the teacher asking them to review letters or words with children, they did not usually follow up these sessions a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

day or two later, nor continue working with their children regularly. Elena's mother was an exception in that she consistently worked with her daughter, and she did so in a way that would directly affect her reading performance--and progress in reading--at school. She did the same sort of thing, and with the same content, as she saw that Elena was doing at school.

What might have happened had Elena's mother not reinforced Elena's learning to the degree she did is a matter for speculation. But here again the evidence is suggestive. Elena began first grade with one of the best prognoses for reading success among the study children: her SRS score was the highest among the study children, and the first-grade teacher's prediction for her reading success was above average. During the first few months of the year, however, indications of how she might do in reading were decidedly mixed. At the end of July, the first month of first grade, the teacher told me that even though Elena often appeared to be "out of it," she actually "knows more than she's letting on." The next day, however, she said she was worried about Elena because she was so inattentive. I had also observed that, though she often raised her hand to volunteer, her mind--certainly her eyes--seemed to wander quite a bit during group lessons. I heard the teacher reprimand her several times for not paying attention or, as the teacher said during class one day, for being "in the clouds." Several days later the teacher told me she was "a little more optimistic" about Elena: "she's really putting forth a lot of effort." But a month later, as I observed the children review with the teacher for their upcoming end-of-book test, Elena's performance was among the worst. She confused letter sounds the group had been working on for some weeks. The teacher was quite discouraged. "I'm almost sure who will pass this test tomorrow," she

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

said to the group, clearly implying that Elena and two or three others perhaps would not.

Yet Elena passed the test comfortably, missing only one of 20 questions. (She did more poorly on the dictation portion; she wrote the vowels correctly, but did not get any of the consonant-vowel syllables.) Nonetheless, the teacher told me she did not think Elena had the requisite skills to go right into the next book, just as she thought two other boys were not "firm" enough to go on. The three were in the same group at this time, and they remained together when the teacher divided the group into two, a higher group that went on to the third book and a lower one that was to review the second book before going on.

About a week later, at the end of the second month of school, the teacher again gave Elena's performance and prospects in reading a mixed review. On the one hand, the teacher's prediction for Elena's reading success was relatively high, a 6 on the 1-9 scale (standardized within classroom, .5). The teacher said Elena was doing "A lot better . . . [she is] more into it, more involved." Though her comprehension was low, the teacher said, she "really participates; her hand is always up. . . Her degree of confidence has increased. She's more secure. She wants to go to the board, pick a card, read. [She] always looked like she was going to cry, but now she's happy, confident." But despite Elena's evident enthusiasm, the teacher felt she had some limitations that would keep her from getting as far as she might otherwise:

> She can't retain as well as the others; she can't discriminate some syllables. Her own ability to memorize, to blend [letter sounds] will impede her progress. She won't "power on" like some others. You

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

can challenge her only until a certain point. I want to set up success for her. I don't want to give her things over her head. She's been easily confused in the past.

We can draw one of two conclusions from these last comments. On the one hand, it may actually have been the case that Elena did learn more slowly than many of the other children, that she had difficulty committing letters and their sounds to memory, then recalling how they blended to form syllables and words. This would indeed be a severe handicap in a reading program that placed a heavy emphasis on rote memorization of letters and sounds, as this one did. (See Goldenberg, 1984, for a full description of the school's reading program.) Alternatively, Elena may have been up to par, intellectually, with her classmates, but for some reason--perhaps because her mind seemed to wander at times or because she did not respond as quickly as the others--the teacher saw her as slower and less likely to do as well as other children with her level of motivation (Note 7). As late as the last month of school, Elena's reading teacher (Elena was now going to another teacher for reading) said Elena was "good, but slower." I too had noticed, when giving her the end-of-year test (before speaking with her reading teacher), that Elena read slowly and haltingly. In fact, on the test form I noted, "sounded everything out--knew sounds, but not fluid."

Whether Elena was actually slow in learning and recalling or if she simply created this impression, either would be inauspicious for Elena's progress in reading. If her learning was in fact impeded by poor memory and letter-blending ability, she would undoubtedly have a difficult time keeping up--unless, of course, she received extra help. But if the teachers' perception led to faulty conclusions about

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

what she knew and how well she knew it, this would also present problems for Elena. She would not be permitted to move ahead and to keep up with her group ("I don't want to give her things over her head," her first reading teacher had said), unless the teacher had unequivocal evidence she was capable of continued progress. As we have seen, even though Elena and two others (one of them Freddy) all passed the end-of-book test, they were placed in a lower group to review the book's content, because their teacher felt they really did not know the letters and syllables sufficiently well to move ahead.

In the absence of extra help, which might enable Elena to learn the letters securely and unequivocally, there was some chance of Elena's continuing to be placed in successively lower groups, as indeed happened with Freddy and another boy in the study. In short, the distinct possibility existed that she might have gone the way of other children who were placed in ever-lower groups, had it not been for her mother's help. There is of course no way to know, but the possibilities are clear. At a minimum, Elena's mother increased the likelihood Elena would be able to continue and progress with her reading group. Accordingly, she diminished the likelihood Elena would fall behind, be placed in lower groups, and not progress in reading that year.

Opportunities missed

Freddy's and Elena's parents were unusual only in that they actually had a very clear and pronounced impact on their children's reading achievement. They were not different from the others with respect to interest in having their children do well in school. Nor did they differ in their apparent willingness to contribute directly to the children's reading achievement. The parents in this sample, as

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

is true of most parents (Midwinter, 1977), were intensely interested in their children's school success and future welfare. Parents did not necessarily have a clear idea of precisely how many years of schooling a particular career might require. And one mother--Marta's--was even uncertain as to how many years of school existed. They also generally expressed uncertainty about what the future may bring; this was most vividly illustrated in the case of Elena's mother. But it was an article of faith among the parents that their children should put forth the necessary effort to do well in school.

And parents said they were willing to do more than they were doing to help their children's achievement. As it was, they either helped the children with their homework or else made sure an older sibling gave assistance. Parents, according to their own reports, responded conscientiously when they received notes from the teacher suggesting or requesting they practice and review letters or words at home. Parents also responded by going to the school whenever teachers contacted them about behavioral or academic problems. What was missing was their steady and consistent help in having their children learn the reading curriculum. Parents responded when the teachers sent home notes, but teachers did this sporadically and inconsistently. Some (such as Elena's teacher) sent flashcards home several times per week; others did it more sparingly, perhaps every several weeks, or only when they felt a child was getting behind and in need of some extra help at home. Parents made certain the children learned whatever it was the teacher included in her notes home, but they did not necessarily continue working with their children at other times, nor see whether the child remembered the following day. It seemed not to have occurred to many of the parents that regular and continued

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

practice at home would improve children's chances of progressing in reading at school. Some may even have felt they would be interfering if they attempted to teach their children to read at home. (This issue came up explicitly in two cases, Violeta's and Fernando's, both of which are discussed below.) The connection between home learning and school achievement that may seem at first so obvious, did not play such a role in the parents' own thinking and, therefore, in their behavior. Most did not undertake to teach their children the letters and their sounds (except in response to teachers' notes home), though all told me they would be willing to help their children more than they presently did, if requested to do so by the teacher. All the parents said they could work with their child (or see to it that an older sibling did so) daily. "An hour, 15 minutes . . . it's no big deal [it does not cost one anything]," the mother of one of the unsuccessful children told me.

Many of the parents even offered their own rationales for more active involvement in their children's learning. When I asked, for example, whether they would be willing to go to the school every two or three months in order to find out what their child was learning and how they could reinforce this at home, all said yes. When I asked whether they thought this would be beneficial for their children's learning, most not only answered affirmatively, but they also offered their own views as to why this would be good. One father said, "It would be good to do that. It would help [for] a parent to make his presence felt in that way. It would make the child feel proud." A mother told me, "It makes the children feel good to have their parents go [to the school]. They feel more secure [safe or cared for]." Other parents told me that closer contacts with the teacher would help the parents know what the children are learning at school. This way, some

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

said, parents will not teach something differently, but instead will help the children with what they need. In short, many had their own cognitively- or affectively-based theory as to why closer home and school contacts would be beneficial; but all agreed it could help their children's school achievement (Note 8).

But if parents were so interested in helping their children do well in school, why did not more parents do what Elena's mother did, that is, see to it that their child learn to read? The answer, very simply, is that in most cases parents perceived no need to do anything out of the ordinary. Elena's mother perceived such a need, as did Freddy's parents after their conference with the teacher. But most parents, not unreasonably, assumed that the children were progressing as they should be. As one father told me, if they do not hear anything from the teacher, they are naturally going to assume all is well. The mother of one of the unsuccessful children (a child who was going to fail first grade) was under the impression the boy's reading achievement was satisfactory; this, the mother told me, was what the reading teacher had said. The parents of a girl who had been misbehaving and doing poorly in reading earlier in the year also assumed her reading achievement was, at year's end, satisfactory. In their minds the big problem was the girl's misbehavior in the fall. Once that was resolved, they had received nothing but positive reports about the child. In May, the father said he was "completely" satisfied with her performance in school that year, even though this child was among the "unsuccessful" readers in the study. The parents of yet another unsuccessful reader saw her reading achievement at year's end as satisfactory. Her mother said she could pronounce the letters, although there were some she did not know yet. The teacher had told them she was doing satisfactorily; her comments about the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

child were virtually all "positive," the father said, and there was no indication the teacher thought the girl's academic progress was inadequate.

Two cases in particular demonstrate how willing the parents were to support their children's learning to read, but how these opportunities were lost.

Violeta's mother told me in the final interview that some months before, she had helped Violeta (one of the unsuccessful children) learn the names of the consonants. She said the teacher had sent home a note asking parents to help their children learn the consonants in the alphabet. The mother spent an afternoon working with her daughter and, she told me, Violeta learned all the letter names. The mother said, as had the teachers, that Violeta was interested, motivated, and had worked hard at the lessons. (In fact, Violeta's mother informed me, the child was extremely conscientious about her homework. Violeta would also spend long periods of time copying letters and words. She kept papers and things she had written since kindergarten, the mother said. (Parents typically reported their children were very interested in print and in copying letters, numbers, words, names, etc.)

Some weeks later, when the mother went to school for a parent conference, she told the teacher she had done as the teacher requested, that is, she had taught Violeta the names of the consonants. But the teacher told the mother that reading was not taught in this manner; they did not teach letter names. The teacher said how the letters should be taught, Violeta's mother told me, but she had forgotten. The mother then stopped teaching her daughter altogether, she told me, because she was afraid she would only confuse the child. The mother said she herself had learned to read by first learning all the letter names; but that is not how the school was

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

teaching reading. "It's not the same here, as it is in one's own country," she said, shrugging slightly.

The mother did not seem overly concerned, however, because in the last conference of the year Violeta's teacher said she was doing very well all around. "The teacher told me she was learning to read very well. . . In everything she was doing well. Everything," and she swept her hand from left to right, in front of her. "I came back home very happy." The mother was extremely pleased, of course, though earlier she had told me that as far as she could tell, Violeta had not learned to read. She found this a little puzzling, but then she said she did not know whether Violeta was learning to read in English or Spanish. Nonetheless, the mother accepted the teacher's assurances, and she was very satisfied. In fact, she told me, Violeta had done better in first grade than she had expected.

In another case, Fernando's, his mother was especially concerned that he learn to read, and she gave him lessons at home. However, during the first parent conference Fernando's teacher recommended to his father that he stop teaching him at home. (The teacher had assumed--incorrectly--that the father was instructing the boy.) In school, Fernando cried frequently and seemed very insecure, and the teacher felt this was probably due to the pressure being exerted by the father.

The father had, indeed, told Fernando's mother not to give the boy reading lessons any more, and she complied. In the spring, she seemed to have begun once again, but she was giving Fernando drills that were largely irrelevant for his progress through the reading curriculum. She showed me, for example, several lines he had written using consonant blends (e.g., bra-bre-bri-bro-bru); children were not taught this until much later in the reading program. In any event,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Fernando's father, despite his great concern and interest in his son's education, had sided with the teacher. Though he knew Fernando could not read, he took great pleasure in the teacher's report that he was doing well in school, just as Violeta's mother had taken great pleasure in the report on her daughter. As much as Fernando's father wanted the boy to succeed academically ("I won't let him leave school," he told me at the beginning of the year, indicating that dropping out simply was not an option for Fernando), he was willing to be patient. Half to me and half to his wife, he said at the last interview that one had to remember that "the teacher's methods are different" from what the mother knew, and that they should let the teacher do her job. "Sometimes I think we worry too much," he said, no doubt partly referring to his own concerns about Fernando's academic success. Once again, we see the great faith the parents placed in the teachers, and the great impact the teachers could have on what parents did.

There was not a parent in the study who was either unwilling or incapable of helping his or her first-grade child succeed academically. Even those with the very lowest educational level, as low as second- or third-grade, knew how to read sufficiently well to help their child learn to read syllables, words, and phrases. Many of the parents were fully literate, and (according to their reports) themselves often read periodicals and books. (See Table 3.) If parents did not help their children any more than they did, it was not because they lacked the ability or the interest in their children's education. It was because they either did not perceive a clear need to intervene in what is generally considered to be the school's domain, or because they were uncertain as to what they could do to help their child learn to read.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Home-school compatibilities:
Avenues for cooperation and school improvement

The assumption of inherent cultural obstacles to minority children's school achievement may be as wrong-headed and, ultimately, as insidious as genetic explanations for minority children's poor school performance: Both imply that factors beyond the school's control--whether genetic or cultural--make satisfactory school achievement virtually impossible for large numbers of children in the United States. Thus, these explanations tend to offer rationalizations for widespread underachievement among minorities in this country.

Despite widely-held views regarding incompatibilities between the school and the minority child's home (Cardenas & Cardenas, 1977; Carter & Segura, 1979), two very important areas of compatibility emerged from the research reported here: First, parents, including minority parents, highly value educational achievement; second, they believe it can only come through individuals' efforts and persistence. These are, of course, two of the cornerstones of American education. The parents in this study seem as firmly wedded to these ideas as any mainstream educator. By building upon these congruencies between the home and the school, educators should be able to form an alliance with parents to improve minority children's school achievement.

Parents can make important contributions to their children's literacy growth in a variety of ways. Freddy's and Elena's parents taught the children directly; apparently, this had a major impact on their achievement. Other parents told me they too, to one degree or another, helped their children sound out words or syllables, or else

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

taught them letter sounds directly. But this represents only one tack parents can take. Parental help need not be equated with parental direct instruction.

Another approach is to read to the child, with the child seated alongside, following as the parent reads. Moffett and Wagner (1983) call this the "lap method." Earlier research (Durkin, 1966) has suggested that many children who learn to read at home learn in this indirect, or "natural" way (Teale, 1982). As early as when their children are in kindergarten (or even before) parents could be encouraged to read with their children on a regular basis. Other possibilities exist as well--playing letter or word games, such as bingo or lotto, learning to read and write names of family members, objects in the child's environment, signs, and so forth. Further, parents could play an important role in developing children's abilities to use oral language, an important precursor to literacy (Moffett & Wagner,1983). A wide range of books provide concrete suggestions for home literacy activities that teachers can suggest to children's parents (see, for example, Kohl, 1973, 1974; Marzollo & Lloyd, 1972; Smethurst, 1975).

Educators and researchers should explore these and other ways of involving minority parents (and, perhaps, majority-culture parents as well) in children's school achievement.

The parents I spoke with, if they are characteristic of minority--or at least Hispanic--parents, represent a vast potential resource in the effort to improve achievement among minority children. Though I cannot generalize beyond the "at risk" population I studied (if, in fact, I can even generalize this far), it seems reasonable to conclude that parents of minority children are highly motivated to help their children succeed, and they are very interested

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

in having their children share these values of success through education--at least when their children are in the very early stages of schooling. The question now is whether schools can capitalize upon this motivation and, more generally, on the opportunities minority parents offer to help improve their own children's school achievement.

NOTES

1. See Goldenberg, 1984, for the full study.

2. The school operates on a year-round calendar, so the academic year begins in July and ends the following June.

3. All names used here are fictitious.

4. She may also have gained practice at other times, not just during reading. But the instruction most likely to influence her progress within the reading curriculum--that is, increase her knowledge of specific letter sounds and her ability to read syllables and words made from these letters--was given during reading. It was possible to learn words at other times during the day, then transfer knowledge of specific letter sounds; but this was unlikely. See Note 5, below.

5. Elena and her group had been taught sight words with r and c (though not with the other letters she could decode), so it is possible that this explains why she knew these letter sounds. Sometimes children can transfer knowledge of a letter sound to a novel context when they have only seen the letter in a sight word they have learned. From my testing of the children, however, it became clear that very few actually did transfer knowledge of individual letter sounds from sight words to letter arrangements they had not seen

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

before (either new words or simply syllables I showed them, e.g., da, fa). Children generally were unable to tell me the sounds of letters they had not been taught explicitly, even though they could read sight words containing those letters. Guszak (1972) suggests this is generally the case for most children, those of average and below average ability. They will not necessarily learn a letter sound, then be able to use this knowledge in novel contexts, simply by learning a sight word containing the letter. So it is unlikely that transfer from sight words can explain Elena's knowing the sounds of c and r.

6. Many of the children (those not in the very lowest groups) seemed to know more letters by the end of the year than could have been predicted based solely upon how far they had gotten in the phonics coninuum, so Elena was no exception in this regard. It is not inconceivable that many of the children who knew letter sounds their groups had not yet been taught had learned them from their parents; some, in fact, did tell me their parents had taught them particular letters. But it is difficult to know where, precisely, a child learned a particular letter, especially if it was in the latter part of the year. By this time, most groups (except for the very lowest ones) were being exposed to many words and stories and were not so strictly tied to the phonics continuum, as I have pointed out previously.

7. A comment by Elena's mother at the second interview tends to support the first possibility--that Elena was indeed rather slow in learning. Her mother had predicted she would do well in reading that year, and I asked what made her think so. "Because she is very enthusiastic about learning," the mother said. Does she learn quickly? I asked. The mother smiled, bobbed her head from side to

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

side, and answered, "More or less"--"mas o menos." There was, in short, a remarkable consistency between the teacher's prediction for Elena's reading success and her explanation for her prediction, and the mother's assessment of how her daughter would do in reading, and why.

8. Interestingly, the parents' theories were not very different from those propounded by the research community. See, for example, Graue et al., 1983.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

REFERENCES

Adelman & Feshbach, S. (1971). Predicting reading failure: Beyond the readiness model. Exceptional Children, 37, 349-354.

Astin, A. (1982). Minorities in American higher education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brophy & Evertson, C. (1981). Student characteristics and teaching. New York: Longman.

Cardenas, J. & Cardenas, B. (1977). The theory of incompatibilities: A conceptual framework for responding to the educational needs of Mexican American children. San Antonio: Intercultural Development Research Association.

Carnine, D. & Silbert, J. (1979). Direct instruction reading. Columbus, Oh.: Merrill.

Carter, T. & Segura, R. (1979). Mexican Americans in school: A decade of change. New York: College Entrance Examination Board

Coles, R. (1977). Privileged ones, Vol. V of Children of Crisis. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Durkin, D. (1966). Children who read early. New York: Teacher's College Press.

Feshbach, S., Adelman, H., & Fuller, W. (1974). Early identification of children with high risk of reading failure. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 7, 639-644.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Goldenberg, C. (1984). Roads to reading: Studies of Hispanic first graders at risk for reading failure. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Unversity of California, Los Angeles.

Graue, E., Weinstein, T., & Walberg, H. (1983, April). School-based home instruction and learning. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.

Gumperz, J. (1981). Conversational inferences and classroom learning. In J. Green & C. Wallat (eds.), Ethnography and language in educational settings. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.

Guszak, F. (1972). Diagnostic reading instruction in the elementary school. New York: Harper & Row.

Hinckley, R., Beal, R., Breglio, V., Haertel, E., and Wiley, D. (1979). Student home environment, educational achievement and compensatory education (Tech. Report #4 from the Study of the Sustaining Effects of Compensatory Education on Basic Skills). Santa Ana, Calif.: Decima Research.

Kohl, H. (1973). Reading, how to. New York: Bantam.

_____. (1974). Math, writing, and games. New York: Vintage.

Lambert, N. (1981). Psychological evidence in Larry P. vs. Wilson, American Psychologist, 36, 937-952.

Marzollo, J. & Lloyd, J. (1972). Learning through play. New York: Harper & Row.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Midwinter, E. (1977). Education for sale. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Moffett, J. & Wagner, B. (1983). Student-centered language arts and reading, K-13 (3rd ed.). Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co.

Ogbu, J. (1978). Minority education and caste. New York: Academic Press.

Olivas, M. (1981). Research on Hispanic education (Program report #81). Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, Stanford University School of Education.

Phillips, S. (1972). Participant structures and communicative competence: Warm Springs children in community and classroom. In C. Cazden, V. John, & D. Hymes (eds.), Functions of language in the classroom. New York: Teachers College Press, 1972.

Smethurst, W. (1975). Teaching young children to read at home. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Steinberg, L., Blinde, P., & Chan, K. (1984). Dropping out among language minority youth. Review of Educational Research, 54, 113-132.

Teale, W. (1982). Toward a theory of how children learn to read and write naturally. Language Arts, 59, 555-570.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 1

First-grade Teachers' Ratings of Attention and Effort

Based on each child's classroom behavior during the past 2-3 weeks, please answer these questions according to this 1-5 rating scale.

Use attached answer sheet with children's names.

1	2	3	4	5
never or hardly ever	sometimes, but not frequently	about half the time	usually; frequently	always or almost always

1. How often does this child listen attentively when instructions or a lesson are being given?

2. How often does this child follow simple directions when they are given to a larger group or a class s/he is a part of?

3. When required, how often does s/he work at a task without constant supervision and reminders from the teacher or aide?

4. How often does this child put forth reasonable effort (that is, pay attention, try to accomplish tasks, etc.) during reading and language (DISTAR, writing, etc.) instruction?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TABLE 2, Family economic and demographic characteristics.

	Parents' education (highest grade) (1)	Parents' occupation	Parents' birthplace	Years in the U.S. (as of 8/83)	No. in household (2)
SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN:					
Marta	3 or 4/--	watch factory/--	Mexico/--	3/--	5
Elena	2/--	in the home/ --	Guatemala/ --	2-1/2 /--	4
Candelaria	6/3	in the home/ hotel cleaning; busboy	Mexico/ Mexico	9/9	8
Freddy	6/college + comm.coll., misc. courses	in the home/ restaurant purchasing, inventory; cashier	Nicaragua/ Guatemala	5/11	9
group mean	---	---	---	6.6	6.5
UNSUCCESSFUL CHILDREN:					
Sylvia	2/6	in the home/ builds furniture frames	Mexico/ Mexico	6/13	7
Fernando	6/12+community coll.	in the home/ cleans airplanes	El Salvador/ Puerto Rico	6/20	7
Violeta	3/2	food pckng/ irreg employed; buys and sells misc. items	Mexico/ Mexico	6/14	7
Karen	6/4	in the home/ irons at cleaners	Mexico/ Mexico	8/10	8
Mario	2/--	unemployed/ --	Mexico	8/--	5
group mean	---	---	---	10.1	6.8

(1) Mother/Father; in case there is no father, a dash (--) follows mother's data.

(2) As of May, 1984. Household sizes changed over the year as a result of births and of relatives moving in and out.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TABLE 3. Parents' expectations, aspirations, and reading habits. (1)

		Expected first-grade school performance (2)	Expected first-grade reading performance (2)	Educational aspirations for child (3)	Educational expectations for child (3)	Parents' reading
SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN:						
Marta	M: Good		Avg	no idea;chose elmtry school when pressed	"I don't know how far she can get"	mag. from market--weekly
Elena	M: Good		Good	could not say; would not guess	same	none
Candelaria	M: Fail		Avg	M & F: finish college; study	"We'll be lucky if she	M&F: news-
	F: Fail		Avg	some profession	finishes h.s."	paper; daily
Freddy	M: Good		Good	no idea	no idea	none;Bible
	F: Good		Good (unsure)	beyond college; "doctor"	some college; maybe finish	paper; Bible-dly
UNSUCCESSFUL CHILDREN:						
Sylvia	M & F: between Good & Avg	M: Sufficient F: Sufficient		no idea "as far as she can"	"Who knows?" "at least" finish h.s.	none/ newspaper; libr. book; ESL lessons
Fernando	M: Good		Avg	M&F: beyond college;	M&F: finish	newsp--dly/ newsp,mag,
	F: Avg		Superior	F: "doctor"	college	relig bk--dly
Violeta	M: Good		Avg	finish h.s./ beyond college;	M&F: finish	none
	F: Good		Avg	"university"; "lawyer"	h.s. "at least"	newsp, class. ads--wkly
Karen	M: Avg		M&F: Good to	"Who knows what God	"I cannot ven- ture what only	ESL lessons/ newsp;relig,
	F: Avg		Superior	will ordain?"	God knows."	hist,phil bks
Mario	M: no idea		Good	"I hope he'll be a teacher, a doctor . ."	would not predict nor guess	none

(1) From November/December interview (Interview #2). Parents' statements enclosed in quotes.
(2) Parents asked to select from: Superior; Good; Average; Sufficient; Fail.
(3) Parents asked to select from: beyond college; finish college; some college; finish high school; finish junior high school; finish elementary.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE